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FM AMEMBASSY PARIS  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5808  
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 002086

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/01/2016  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ELAB](#) [ECON](#) [FR](#) [PINR](#) [CASC](#) [SOCI](#)  
SUBJECT: SUBURBAN UNREST AND STUDENT DEMONSTRATIONS: HOW  
THEY ARE DIFFERENT

Classified By: PolMC Josiah Rosenblatt for reasons 1.4 (B & D).

11. (C) Summary: Unlike the anarchic violence of November, the current demonstrations by students and organized labor against the First Employment Contract (CPE) have largely proceeded peacefully despite violent acts by bands of underclass suburban youths directed against police and demonstrators alike. That said, it would be a mistake to assume that the root causes of the events of November and March have nothing in common. In reality, underclass suburban youth and their student counterparts from the working and middle classes both face the same diminishing prospects for a decent job and standard of living equal to or greater than that of their parents. The violent minority of suburban youths that perpetrated last fall's violence are at the extreme end -- the least employable -- of a spectrum of youth in crisis because of lack of economic opportunities. Middle-class students have so far acted within the system through organized political expression, whereas a (nearly exclusively male) minority of suburban youth have resorted to meaningless violence. So far the two groups have viewed each other more as adversaries than allies, and this is likely to remain so. If current social tensions are persist, however, a more widespread climate of confrontation could potentially encourage suburban youths to engage in a new round of violence in the suburbs. End summary.

November and March are Different

12. (C) With resistance mounting against the First Employment Contract (CPE), France finds itself in the midst of its second crisis of recent months, following the wanton violence of November perpetuated by underclass youths in the suburbs. Unlike the last time, this latest crisis has appeared more "traditional" and less threatening to the extent that it features students and members of the working and middle classes who, with the active participation of organized labor and the leftist parties (including the main opposition, center-left Socialist party), are protesting vociferously but largely peacefully against a labor reform promulgated nearly without parliamentary debate by a center-right majority government. The difference is further underscored by television and print media images of underprivileged, hooded, almost exclusively male suburban youths seen clearly exploiting the demonstrations to attack demonstrators and police alike. It is tempting to conclude that the events of November and March have very little, if anything, in common.

Causes Same, Reactions Different

13. (C) Such a conclusion would nonetheless be somewhat misleading, given that the events of November and March share the same underlying causes -- namely economic stagnation and employment inflexibility that results in lack of opportunity for the young. Whether underclass, working class, or middle class, French youths have in common a pervasive sense that they either already are, or are about to be, effectively

denied the kinds of career prospects -- modest or otherwise, but in either event stable and predictable -- enjoyed by the previous generations. They differ in that the March demonstrators remain relatively empowered within the system. Their efforts are aimed at influencing a system to which they feel they still or should belong, by seeking the withdrawal of a piece of legislation passed with undue haste and without an attempt to solicit their buy-in. The underclass youths of November, by contrast, are the ultimate outsiders of French society, whose violence was reflected in an eruption of anger, but without any specific political objective.

#### Both in a Downward Spiral

14. (C) Unemployment in France, which has hovered at 10 percent overall for years and at 22 percent for French youth (and 40 percent for underclass suburban youth), is in itself nothing new. What is new is that for today's youths of all classes -- with the exception of those students who qualify for the elite schools (the so-called "grandes ecoles") -- the goals of attaining a standard of living higher than that of their parents and of planning their lives accordingly, with the predictability that follows from relative job security, appear increasingly and irrevocably beyond their reach. In the case of underclass youth from the suburbs, they have come to the conclusion that the hard work of their parents, often in menial jobs and at low wages, has not led to any improvement in their own prospects, assuming that they can find work at all. The factory jobs of yore have simply disappeared. Although to a lesser extent, the same distress over diminishing prospects holds true, increasingly, for the much higher numbers of students now attending the less prestigious universities. Many of them will complete their studies, obtain their diplomas, seek internships, and make use of other opportunities, often state-funded, to acquire

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the credentials that will make them attractive to future employers. But jobs with genuine career prospects are increasingly few and far between.

#### The Sound -

15. (C) The differences between November and March are perhaps best explained by the psychological reactions of the underclass and student youth to France's ongoing crisis of unemployment. The March demonstrators appear motivated primarily by a pervasive sense of anxiety; they are protesting "for" the French system and preservation of the status quo rather than "against" it and for change, fearful that the predictable careers and job benefits of the previous generation, which they believe is their due, will be denied them. They resent that their generation is being singled out to bear the burden of lessened job security in lieu of spreading the sacrifice more equitably throughout French society (whence the volatile indignation and charges of discrimination in what purports to be an egalitarian society). That said, these youths still believe that there exists a more inclusive, fair approach to solving their problems, as reflected in the fact that -- so far at least -- they have channeled their protests through the existing system.

#### - And the Fury

16. (C) A minority of the underclass suburban youths, by contrast, have responded with rage to their situation. Bereft of schooling, employment and social advancement, they are outsiders with little, almost nothing, to lose. Effectively excluded from the French political scene (underclass minorities are not active in, or cultivated by, any of the major political parties, including the center-left Socialist Party and the Communist party), they also have few means at their disposal to articulate their anger in a coherent fashion. As a result, they have literally "acted out" their fury in acts of vandalism and acts of defiance

against the police. This is a vicious cycle, as underclass urban culture, lack of education, and now violence, only reinforce the systemic racial and ethnic discrimination that is preventing their integration into French society. Additionally, some of them see the students as part of this discriminatory society and their demonstrations as efforts to preserve the status quo. This also helps explain why a small minority of these underclass youths are prepared to prey on the March demonstrators despite the fact that they and their student counterparts are confronted with the same problems of unemployment and dimming prospects for their futures.

#### So far Separate, but Convergence Possible

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17. (C) Thus far at least, the agitators of November and the demonstrators of March have viewed each other more as adversaries than as potential allies, which no doubt reflects their different social and ethnic origins. There have been no attempts to make common cause, either rhetorically or through concerted action. Indeed, the March demonstrators have every reason to view the underclass suburban youth with great distrust, particularly given the latter's attempts to prey on the former during recent demonstrations. But that does not mean that convergence, if not an alliance, is outside the realm of possibility. There is always a chance that tensions between the government on the one side, and students and labor unions on the other, will continue to increase if both sides continue to hold firm in their positions. In a worst-case scenario, continuing tensions and confrontations between demonstrators (or suburban hooligans) and police could spark more widespread civil disturbances, possibly even setting off in parallel a new round of violence in the suburbs.

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